Strategic application of events

Phil Crowther *

Event Management, Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, Stoddart Building, Sheffield S1 1WB, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the area of strategy and events through a qualitative study. Organisations are increasingly seeking to achieve strategic objectives through the delivery of events. Particularly, as regards the role of events in the communication of brand strategy. This paper seeks to illuminate the underpinning reasoning for this trend, and examine prevalent issues relating to event management and event experience. There is a critical evaluation of the factors that facilitate and constrain events in supporting organisational strategy, with a number of themes identified that impede events from realising their strategic potential.

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1. Introduction

The growing recognition of event management as a profession in its own right, as suggested by Bowdin et al. (2006), can be seen as symptomatic of a wider acceptance of the strategic value of events. Managed effectively, planned events are a pervasive tool in the delivery of strategic goals for organisations in the public, private, and not for profits sectors (Getz, 2007). The degree to which this is achieved impinges upon organisations ability to professionally manage their portfolio of events, or as stated by Gupta (2003, p. 87) 'events must be scientifically planned, executed, and evaluated'. This discussion, while accurate, is somewhat simplistic. The relationship between planned events and brand strategy is composite and demands closer inspection.

Events as a marketing concept have received scant coverage. This seems obscure given the obvious prevalence of events in both attraction and retention marketing (Gummerson, 1999). Whether an event is deliberately integrated in marketing planning, or much more ad hoc and indirect, it remains a pervasive communicator of brand personality and values. This paper aims to augment related research and build upon the pioneering work of writers such as Whelen and Wholfeil (2006) who adopt the terms; 'live communications' and 'brand hyperreality' to characterise the application of events by organisations. Russel (2007) uses the expression 'live the brand'. Such phrases neatly capture the challenge organisations encounter in harnessing such a pervasive instrument.

It is recognised that the term 'planned events', within a marketing context, cover a multitude of areas and that a more focussed study would offer richer outcomes. However given the emergent nature of this research area it is considered opportune at this stage to present a holistic picture. With a view to refining this in future studies. Planned events, by their very nature, carry inherent unpredictability and risk. It is recognised that events, within the realms of service marketing, are characterised by intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Brown et al., 1994; Zeithaml et al., 1985). These factors combine to make events a complex and demanding device to successfully employ. This challenge is intensified when seeking to exploit events for strategic, in addition to more operational outcomes.

Getz (2007) contends that the 'experience' of stakeholders and attendees is the core phenomenon for event management. The challenge of aligning brand values with something as multifaceted as customer (or event) experience is manifest. This is compounded when one considered that larger organisations often deliver an extensive and varied number of events each year. The challenge therefore exists to ensure, through effective planning and management, that these events deliver a broadly coherent attendee experience that is consistent with the brand. It is therefore implicit that these events, as Getz (2007) contends, have to be carefully co-ordinated and designed (or at least facilitated). The competence of a given organisation to successfully achieve this is closely connected to discussion of their strategic capabilities and culture (Johnson et al., 2009).

Renowned event planning models (Allen et al., 2002; Getz, 1997; Goldblatt, 2005; Shone and Parry, 2004; Watt, 1998) do not make obvious links between organisational strategy and event planning and management. As events take on a more noteworthy

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* Tel.: +44 0114 225 3145.
  E-mail address: philip.crowther@shu.ac.uk.

role within organisations, clearer links must be established between organisational strategy and events, as underlined by Bowdin et al. (2006) in his discussion of strategic event planning. Research would indicate that the alignment of strategy, event management, and the outcomes of events can be problematic. This was illustrated in the work of Pugh and Wood (2004, p. 70) who exposed, within local authorities, event design and management that was overly 'operational and ad hoc, resulting in missed opportunities' to underpin the strategic goals of the institution.

Given that 'event marketing is gaining popularity' (Gupta, 2003, p. 87), related literature is fragmented, and there is a scarcity of empirical and conceptual research directly evaluating the interdependencies between events and brand strategy. This paper, informed by the author's study of a Higher Education Institution in the UK, seeks to augment existing research and advance the process of achieving a more coherent conceptual framework. This paper provides a literature review that illuminates the connections between events and brand strategy. The primary research presents a critical evaluation of the organisational factors that facilitate or constrain the planning and delivery of events, with a view to sustaining and enhancing brand strategy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic use of events

The adoption of a 'strategic and holistic approach to management' (Evans et al., 2003) is advantageous, allowing organisations to effectively harness all areas of operations. Too often however, as outlined by Pugh and Wood (2004, p. 62), '...the opportunity to accomplish strategic objectives (through events) may often be overlooked'. In this respect events can be, as previously discussed, overly tactical and operational. In recent years the role of events has evolved. As Bowdin et al. (2006, p. 3) highlighted, 'corporations and businesses embrace events as key elements in their marketing strategies'. While marketing strategy is the focus of this paper, it should be noted that events play a much more comprehensive role in delivering strategic objectives, across all three sectors (private, public and not for profit).

The attractiveness of events, for private sector organisations in competitive (and often saturated) markets is palpable. Research from the GP Johnson Company (Russel, 2007) demonstrates persuasively that events can play a strategic role in driving business value. In addition to discussion about enhancement of brand and positioning, they develop critical success factors that establish quantifiable links between event strategy and return of investment (ROI). Their work demonstrates that events can deliver a higher ROI than other strategies due to a variety of factors such as the highly targeted and also interactive nature of events. It can be seen that to be of proven strategic value event management must be integrated into the wider strategic objectives and planning of the organisation, and should be underpinned by rigorous evaluation associated with quantifiable measurements.

Within a public sector context Getz (2007, p. 21) observed that 'planned events are created to achieve specific outcomes, including those related to economy, culture, society, and environment'. Events have been readily viewed, and continue to be seen as a mechanism through which to realise shorter term tactical outcomes, with the prevailing outlook being that most companies deliver events on an ad hoc basis (Gupta, 2003). The application of events to achieve strategic objectives is much more embryonic. This view is supported by Pugh and Wood (2004) who detected an increasingly strategic approach by local authorities to the incorporation of events.

Whelen and Wholfeil (2006) provide a case study illustrating how 'live event communications' were used to achieve strategic

advantage at a German University (The Fachhochschule Nordost-niedersachsen). Whelan and Wholfeil illustrated how the institutions strategic aims and values demonstrated three points of differentiation (innovation, customer orientation, and 'being a Higher Education Institution for Personalities) that were used to inform the development of a creative event strategy. The alignment of the event objectives with institution strategy informed the whole process from planning and design to delivery and evaluation. The values identified were fed into the event design and were therefore communicated experientially to the stakeholders who were exposed to the event.

2.2. Strategic capability and events

The capability of a given organisation to deliver superior performance is related closely to their application of competencies and the deployment of resources (Johnson et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2003). This discussion can be applied to events, with the implication being that competencies and resources impact the relationship between events and strategy, and the delivery of a coherent event experience. Analysis of an organisations resources and competencies provides a framework through which to analyse the factors that enhance and hinder event planning and management within an organisation. Importantly, the discussion identifies that resources can be tangible or intangible such as knowledge, or intellectual capital (Fitzroy and Hulbert, 2005). As an emergent field, the knowledge and shared practice underpinning planning and execution of events is inconsistent, both within organisations, but also between organisations and sectors.

Analysis of strategic competencies facilitates an understanding of how the systems, processes, and communications within organisations enhance or hinder the success of events in achieving both tactical and strategic objectives. Ultimately the assessment of resources and competences that combine to impact event management is determining in understanding whether events can be considered a core competence (Hamel and Prahalad, 1990, in Johnson et al., 2009) and therefore a source of superior performance and competitive advantage for the given organisation.

Schein (1997) (in Johnson et al., 2009, p. 128) defined organisation culture as the 'basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation'. Discussion of how an organisations activity impact event management must include consideration of the important issue of culture. Particularly an organisations cultural web, and discussion of structures, power, rituals, will be significant as regards event planning and delivery.

2.3. Events as 'live brand communications'

Branding is a core activity of an organisations marketing function. The strength of the brand is underpinned by clearly defined attributes, values, and personality (Dibb et al., 2006). Effective brand strategy is crucial to the ability of an organisation to differentiate itself. It is within this context that one can readily identify the charm of events.

Getz (2007, p. 9) considered that 'the essence of a planned event is that the experience has to be designed (or at least facilitated) and would not otherwise occur'. The perceived experience of the attendee can be seen as determining in their enduring impression of the organisation. Importantly, as a planned experience, events have the potential to communicate pre-determined messages and cultivate desired relationships with stakeholders (Kotler, 2003).

Ravald and Gronoos (1996) highlighted that the core of what an organisation is producing is fundamental, but it may not ultimately be the reason for purchasing from a given organisation. Ravald and Gronoos stress the importance of the relationship a company

establishes and maintain with customers and clients, and wider stakeholders. This perspective illuminates the relational qualities of events. It should, however, be noted that practitioners also invest in events as a tactical, sales generation strategy, in addition to more specific brand building activities, such as public relations event (Gupta, 2003).

Pine and Gilmore (1998) developed thinking around the experience economy. This trend is highlighted by Russel (2007) who comments that organisations are increasingly turning to events to fortify their marketing communications strategy, which is indicative of a wider shift towards the adoption of a range of experiential communications. The experiential quality makes events distinct from many other forms of marketing communications, with the opportunity to engage people actively and on a voluntary basis as opposed to the target being passive and involuntary (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998).

Whelan and Wholfeil (2006, p. 315) provided the following definition: '...event marketing aims to harness the potential for emotional bonds through shared customer experiences by providing brand experiences, entertainment, and education, which customers perceive as adding to their enjoyment and experienced quality of life'. The attractiveness of events is therefore evident. As Weinberg (1993) identified, many products and services have matured to a point where they can no longer be differentiated purely on quality and functional benefits alone. Consequently events provide a means through which to communicate the brand in a more invasive manner, aspiring to create emotional connections, to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers (Gronoos, 1994, in Ravald and Gronoos, 1996). The experiential nature of events is apposite in this respect.

Russel (2007) coins the phrase 'Experience Marketing'. This concept emphasises the need to see events strategically as one part of an ongoing interactive relationship (conversation) with stakeholders. Implicit in the concept is the aspiration to develop life long relationships. Pre-event communication, post-event communication, and underpinning the relationship by leveraging 'touch points' between events, are all integral to the experience marketing model. This presents a new paradigm for many event managers as it takes them beyond the traditional time parameters of their perceived role. If organisations are to realise the strategic potential of events, events must be informed by strategic objectives and integrated into the wider marketing planning of the organisation (Gupta, 2003).

A balanced argument about the nature of events in marketing communications demands consideration of the concept of 'perceived sacrifice' (Monroe, 1991). Discussion of customer perceived value (Zeithaml, 1988) must include detailed consideration of perceived sacrifice, in addition to perceived value. Event attendees have typically incurred real costs in their presence at an event, in the form of time, money, and effort. Additionally there is an inevitable opportunity cost of their attendance. Active and voluntary attendance at events can be seen to be consistent with higher perceived sacrifice than the passive and often involuntary consumption associated with other forms of marketing communications. In order to maintain customer perceived value, an increase in perceived sacrifice would need to be offset by a proportional increase in perceived value (Ravald and Gronoos, 1996).

When evaluating the enhancement of perceived customer value, the imperative is to either increase the benefits or reducing the perceived sacrifice. The most obvious focus of the event manager would be the enhancement of the perceived benefits, which would be a focus upon offering an improved event experience. However customer perceived value can be added by a focus upon reducing perceived sacrifice. As an example of how this can be applied in an event management context, they may focus upon the psychological (or cognitive) costs (Gronoos, 1992, in Ravald and Gronoos, 1996) associated with event attendance and engagement. Should the organisation adopt professional event management and design then the 'customer journey' of an event attendee could be more streamlined so as to reduce the cognitive effort required by the attendee. By taking a holistic and comprehensive view of the attendees 'customer service journey' associated with the event experience, from finding out about the event, travelling to it, and returning home, the opportunity exists for the event manager to refine the 'customer service journey' to reduce psychological (cognitive) costs.

2.4. Event design and programming

The preceding discussion emphasises the phenomenon of event experience, which Getz (2007) placed at the heart of Event Studies. Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 3) considered that '...companies stage an experience whenever they engage customers, connecting with them in a personal, memorable way'. All of these experiences are significant in the communication of brand strategy, further emphasising the validity of the experience marketing discussion in Section 2.3. Discussion is underpinned by the belief that should the event experience not meet (or exceed) the expectations of the attendee then the effective communication and differentiation of brand strategy is compromised.

Programming is the term that encapsulates all activities associated with the planning and design of the event experience for a planned event (Bowdin et al., 2006; Russel and Jamieson, 2007; Torkildson, 2005). Bowdin et al. (2006) emphasised how programming is both an art and science. The event manager has the opportunity to adopt artistic principles to creatively design the event. This sentiment embodies the potential of events as a creative tool through which to deliver pervasive communication. This creativity is of course tempered by realities associated with finance, operations, and health and safety. Wider organisational factors, as discussed in Section 2.2 are also prevalent.

Torkildson (2005) outlined a six-stage approach to programming, from the clear establishment of goals through to evaluation. The model takes into account the need to set the event within the context of organisational goals and underpin these goals with measurable objectives. The cultivation of a process whereby the event planning and design is informed by clear strategic intent is manifest. The model advocates that decisions about event design and implementation are preceded by thorough appreciation of organisation, stakeholders, resources, and environment. Once these steps have been achieved the opportunity exists to design and deliver an event that can maximise the customer perceived value (Ravald and Gronoos, 1996).

The event planning models are best seen cyclically to denote the need for continuous improvement in the event, and to continually evolve so as to meet changes in the macro and micro-environments. Thorough evaluation of event objectives should be hard and soft, and also from inside and outside of the organisation (Torkildson, 2005) allowing the event manager to signpost areas to enhance the event experience. Event planning and delivery should become a virtuous process whereby improvements to the design (and therefore experience) are made over time, enhancing the communication of brand strategy. Ravald and Gronoos (1996) advocated the need to establish a thorough understanding of customer need as the task of delivering the right value to the right customers can be a hazardous game. Therefore the achievement of strategic value is best served by a cyclical process whereby organisations learn from each event and successfully apply this learning. All of the above is reliant upon an integrated approach to the management, execution, and evaluation of events.

2.5. Events and higher education institutions

The organisation investigated in the primary research is a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK. As such it is opportune to evaluate the relevant literature that links events, strategy, and HEIs.

The recent marketisation of HE is underpinned by developments such as the introduction of tuition fees which has led to students behaving in a more consumerist way (Maringe, 2006). Increased competition in the marketplace and reduced public sector funding has also stimulated noteworthy changes in the strategies adopted by HEIs. These developments are challenging for institutions that, due to the nature of their activities, typically turn over 20–25% of their customer base each year.

As a reaction to the trend outlined above, HEIs are increasingly adopting marketing approaches that have been effective in the business world (Bunzel 2007; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Historically literature that seeks to evaluate the marketing activities of HEIs has been critical in its conclusions (Chapleo, 2005; Maringe, 2006), particularly when evaluating marketing at a strategic level. It is therefore an interesting development that HEIs are increasingly adopting a strategic approach to marketing, and becoming preoccupied with issue of brand, differentiation, and positioning (Bakewell and Gibson Sweet, 1998).

HEIs are fragmented organisations which makes the aspiration of a coherent brand personality problematic (Chapleo, 2005). The diversity that exists creates tensions, which inevitably impacts the operations of HEIs. It is therefore pertinent that Gronoos (1994) (in Ravald and Gronoos, 1996) emphasised the importance of developing relations with actors within the organisations micro-environment. Within the HEI setting the relations between the university management and academic, administration, estates, and, of course, students can be seen as pivotal to the successful delivery of events. The fragmented nature of an institution would potentially make this problematic. At a time when student's behaviour is increasingly informed and they are making rational choices (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) there is a need for events to be carefully designed and professionally managed in order to deliver strategic benefit. Within the context of the above discussion this challenge is marked for HEIs who aspire to achieve strategic advantage through events.

3. Methodology

The research methodology chosen for this study was a qualitative paradigm. This was a small research project based on a case study of one organisation. The research was exploratory in nature, with the interest being in the individuals experience rather than the generalisibility and measurable information a quantitative study would bring (Cotterill and Letherby, 1994; Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Bryman and Bell, 2003).

Qualitative research allows the researcher to use methods such as in-depth interviewing, which was chosen for this study. Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of individuals from senior managers within the organisation, and those responsible for the planning and execution of events across the institution.

Interviewing was the preferred method of data collection because the researcher was interested in eliciting individual's experiences, and was able to pursue specific lines of enquiry as issues were raised. This would not have been as easy to do if a focus group had been used as the information elicited would be from a group consensus (Morse, 1994). The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Bodgen and Bilken, 1992) with the inclusion criteria being people who were internal stakeholders relating to marketing strategy and event management within the university. The questions to participants were structured around key topic areas. Many of the questions were focussed around gaining an in-depth understanding of entire event management process from their perspective, from the conception of the event to questions about evaluation. Respondents were asked about their knowledge and understanding of the marketing and brand of the HEI, and how their events supported these activities. Questions were also focussed upon how events could better support marketing, and brand, strategy going forward.

An in-depth thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered. The researcher used a systematic approach to the analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) who suggest that thematic analysis is often misunderstood and if carried out in a systematic manner is a very critical and detailed method of qualitative analysis. Braun and Clarke suggested three major stages, those being: the researcher familiarising themselves with the data which would include immersing themselves in the data and looking for meaning. The second stage being the generation of codes which involved organising the data into meaningful groups. The final stage of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) is the searching for themes whereby the researcher develops descriptive themes which are then further analysed and developed into analytical themes. The researcher developed themes from both the interview data gained through the primary research; in addition, themes were derived deductively from the secondary research through the literature review. Initially descriptive codes were assigned to the data; these codes were described by a short word or phrase. Further analysis was then carried out looking for common links within the descriptive themes to develop fewer analytical themes.

In order to address the perceived unscientific nature of qualitative research it was of paramount importance to ensure both trustworthiness and honesty within the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bryman and Bell, 2003). The researcher ensured a rigorous process was followed. Approximately 1 month after interviewing each interviewee was followed up by a phone call or email to confirm the information given by the participant had been correctly interpreted by the researcher. A critical stance was taken by the researcher throughout the research process as he had experience in working in event management. The researcher was aware of his own biases and preconceptions and aware that subjectivity could therefore arise. The researcher reflected continually throughout the research process from the development of the research question, the research process, data collection and analysis. Reflections were discussed with team members within the researcher's academic team in order to triangulate.

The researcher ensured any risk to participants was minimised by ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality was maintained. The participants were assigned pseudonyms, following data analysis the tapes and transcripts were kept safe and secure in a locked filing cabinet.

4. Results

The analysis from the case study suggested five main analytical themes that each contributes to the focus of this research. These are discussed in Sections 5.1–5.5 below, and are entitled:

- Events: a cottage industry
- Always tactical: sometime strategic
- Variable event experiences
- Objectives and evaluation: a virtuous process
- Events: the need for a community

These themes are further developed and explored in Section 5.

As a precursor to a discussion of the themes it is useful to provide some context to the case study HEI. They are a 'new

university' ('post 92 university'), and were previously a Poly-technic. The principle area of activity is undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, however others areas such as research and knowledge transfer are growing in importance. Consistent with the discussion in Section 2.5, their approach has evolved considerably in recent years to facilitate success in an increasingly competitive market.

Despite their portfolio of activities widening, a major focus for events remains that of recruitment. This is emphasised by James, Head of Marketing, who remarks that,

'one of the things I was saying the other day was there are very few industries I know of where you're actually turning over 20% to 25% of your customer base every year. You know, we're in a position where we're having to generate 6000 new customers every year and obviously events are critical to generating that level of interest in the university'.

Importantly however, while undergraduate and postgraduate teaching remain the prime activities of the university, as their portfolio of activities grows, so does the breadth and scale of events. A broad typology of the HEIs events would comprise; recruitment (UK and International), business to business, research, corporate events. This research takes a holistic view of the institutions external facing events, therefore it excludes internal events, and learning events (such as those directly associated with teaching and learning). For the purpose of the case study, an event was classified as having an attendance of twenty or more.

4.1. Events: a cottage industry

The above section offers a basic typology of events, in reality each of the titles is a gateway to a much more detailed and complex picture. On an annual basis the HEI delivers thousands of events, to tens of thousands of attendees, and these are delivered by hundreds of event organisers. James remarked that,

'events remain a cottage industry, there needs to be more of a professional framework across the institution…too often events tend to be treated as one offs'.

Crucially, as indicated by James, the organising teams, and individuals for events, are often located disparately around the institution, pursuing a variety of, often parochial, approaches. Inevitably the above reality creates many challenges for the institution in the context of event management, and the connections between events and strategy. A prevailing theme of the study relates to the fragmented picture that emerges when investigating events and event management within the institution.

Notably, a key finding is that the institution boasts a number of teams who can readily be considered as pockets of excellence in event planning and delivery; particularly in some aspects of 'recruitment event' and 'corporate events'. Equally, however there are many other examples where event management is approached in a much more informal and ad hoc manner. There was strong evidence from the respondents that the further event management shifts from the 'corporate centre' of the institution the more tenuous the links to strategy and the more informal and underdeveloped the event management process.

Kate (event manager) has worked in different departments and expressed the view that departments are at very different stages in their management of events. When she first arrived in her current role, she remembered that,

'there were no structures anywhere. There was nothing. No processes, you know, and I found it extremely difficult to adapt. So what I produced myself was a calendar of my events. There was

nothing and you'd just sit there bewildered really thinking my god, how do these people work?'

When asked about who produces pre-event marketing communications, Wendy an event organiser of research related events responded,

'normally it would be me'.

This response can be seen as a metaphor for a wider theme whereby some event managers showed a tendency to work in silo. This manifested itself in a number of the interviews with event organisers.

In the context of the discussion in this paper the potential negative impacts of the cottage industry theme are manifest. One specific example, relates to missed opportunities to leverage PR value both pre- and post-event. A frustration for Stephen, Director of Communications, is that events occur across the institution and the central, and localised, marketing and PR teams are often oblivious to their existence. Therefore valuable opportunities are missed to achieve PR leverage from the event. Stephen explains,

'events come in 'through the back door' and have no profile beyond the immediate, which makes them a missed opportunity'

This has the additional effect of creating an array of events that communicate the institutions brand in a very diverse and disparate manner.

4.2. Always tactical: sometime strategic

It was apparent from the interviews with senior managers that their aspiration was that events supported brand strategy in two interrelated ways. Firstly that brand was conveyed through the event design and delivery, and therefore readily communicated to the attendees and other stakeholders. Secondly, each event delivers an experience, to attendees, which is superior to competitors and therefore a source of differentiation. The case study findings suggested that this aspiration was problematic. Stephen argued that,

"…the institution really needs to understand events in the wider context of how events not only reinforce recruitment, but how events reinforce the positioning of the institution".

However, as asserted by James,

'it is an uphill struggle to get the institution to understand the links between events and positioning….where there's a direct recruitment event the institution sees it and goes for it, whereas a kind of indirect positioning type event, the institution is still rather sceptical'.

The internal communication of the institutions brand strategy, including three core brand values, has been a priority in recent years, James considers that the values are,

'in the fabric of the institution'.

Claire, who is the event manager for recruitment and outreach events supported this and emphasised the prevalence of the brand values, stating that,

'I think everyone in my team's conscious of them (brand values), but those values are embedded implicitly in everything that we do in how we present the institution. You know, the sort of sessions that we provide, the sort of information we're giving people as well

as how staff and students present themselves I think those things are, you know, just part of that'.

In stark contrast Wendy, who organised more than 25 events each year, showed no awareness of brand values, and saw the displaying of the logo on posters as the required evidence of supporting brand strategy. When asked about awareness of the institutions brand and values, Kate (event organiser) responded

'No, we're not. I'm not, I've got to admit. I do know where the marketing side is, you know, on it – on the design of something the branding is important. I know what to do with it, but I don't go into the strategy',

When further questioned about what she understood to be branding, Kate replied,

'I'm talking about the strap lines and things. I don't know anything else'.

The above illustrates contrasting positions, with a pattern appearing whereby one can visualise a continuum of events. At one end are events that are extremely closely linked to the delivery of brand strategy. At the other end of the scale events seem divorced from brand strategy, whether due to ignorance or ambivalence.

It is interesting to consider the views of Dan, who states, when questioned about brand values,

'I mean we have had like branding training and things, haven't we, and we get the input from the marketing team in terms of their knowledge of the branding and, like you were saying, with the core values and things. That is something that we're very aware of and that we try and incorporate those themes within our invitation days and things'.

Dan delivers recruitment events at a departmental level, but has both regular formal and informal contact with corporate teams to inform the planning and design of the events. His response portrays a middle ground between the two extremes illustrated above. This is consistent with the view that there exists a continuum of events with a proliferation of planned events positioned at different intervals.

There is strong evidence that events are too often treated as 'one offs' to achieve a short-term tactical outcome, they are therefore planned and executed with an inconsistent focus upon (and awareness of) brand message. There is equally strong evidence of highly variable event planning and management approaches. Given that event design (planning and management) is highly influential in determining event experience, this presents a challenge to the coherent delivery of brand strategy. This incoherence is exaggerated further by the disjointed relationship between pre-event communication, event delivery, and post-event communication.

A progressive development for the HEI is the adoption of what James termed,

'positioning events'

These events occur on a monthly basis and involve a guest lecture, and question and answer session with chosen distinguished figures from the worlds of fashion, sport, media, and politics. These events are promoted to a wide range of stakeholders from civic dignitaries, industry figures, to academic fraternity and students. They are managed by the university's corporate communications team and are carefully aligned to brand strategy. The evidence is that they are carefully integrated to other marketing communications activities such as advertising and PR. These are typically free events and therefore constitute a deliberate leveraging of events as a marketing communication tool. They present a good example of where the institution makes tangible links between strategy and events.

4.3. Variable event experiences

Inevitably the disparity in engagement with the brand, and also event management practice, creates variability in the experiences of event attendees. Stephen explains that thirty percent of applications come from local and regional postcodes, so therefore at any given event a high percentage of attendees are from the region around the institution. He outlined that,

'... you'll have a lot of people coming in with their sons and daughters, prospective students, who are also local businessmen and local, you know, people involved in the area, so they're going to get a perspective on the university from that open day which they'll carry away with them into their business...'

The reality being that any given individual could interface with the various services of the institution in a number of ways over the course of their life, not to mention influence many other peoples brand perception through word of mouth. Therefore the aspiration of achieving a coherent and mutually supportive event experience would seem legitimate.

The evidence is that the justifiable aspiration for consistency and coherence is inherently problematic in an institution characterised by diversity. The interviews unearthed a number of contradictions. Some of these are outlined below. For example Claire emphasised that,

'...everything that we send out is sent to a design studio so it's got a consistent look and it's professionally printed and I think that's especially important with some of the smaller things we're doing – that nothing is sent out looking shabby or photocopied or ... You know, everything is professionally presented in a consistent way'

In contrast Kate stated that she rarely has any contact with the departmental, or central, marketing teams in the institution when organising events.

Claire referred to,

'...that (work with schools and colleges) its not sort of ad-hoc... It's targeted and it's brought together and it's long-term'

Whereas Wendy's experience is that,

'...I think our biggest problem – and I can say it for every event I've organised – is we do not start planning early enough. There is a perception that you can organise an event for 70 people in a month and everything goes swimmingly on the day; have the target audience that you always dreamed about, have the speakers you always wanted and people will worship at your feet. That's the most ridiculous notion and I wish I could beat it out of some people'.

Significant variation in the adoption of apposite event management processes was evident in the research. Partially due to the understanding and skills of the event managers but also due to the environment within with they work. As Wendy demonstrated she is constantly working to short timelines with internal stakeholders that lack an appreciation of event management. Conversely Claire benefited from longer timelines and worked in a more planned environment.

The research revealed another feature that constrained the delivery of a more planned and consistent event experience. Many events across the institution involve a collaboration of different

groups of people (management, academics, administration, catering, security, porters). Recruitment events are a good example of this. There is a multi-stakeholder approach to the planning and promotion of the event, with the programme on the day delivered by a combination of many groups. The issue of consistency is highlighted by Claire,

'…so we're trying to share best practice and focus on positive things, not pick anyone out as being the weak part of the process…'

The diversity and disparity within the HEI present a considerable challenge to the delivery of events that provide a coherent attendee experience that is aligned to the brand.

4.4. Objectives and evaluation: a virtuous process

There is clear evidence from the research that certain events within the institution have a much more robust process of determining objectives and ensuring there is thorough evaluation of both hard and soft factors. Principally, although not exclusively, these are recruitment events which are of prime strategic importance to the institution. As Stephen states,

'…it's an event that's being put on with clear recruitment objectives, then there are various metrics that you can build around that in terms of customer satisfaction surveys and in terms of looking at what happened in terms of following some of those students through to see whether they ended up putting us down as first choice and so on and so forth'

Sophie, who has responsibility for civic events, stated that,

'…for major events we issue evaluation forms to all the delegates and for every event that we do where we haven't got control of the event we have an on-line questionnaire that goes to the organiser. So we receive feedback from the organiser on behalf of his delegates'

Dan commented on event evaluation,

'We do things like get feedback from the student crew as well and their perspective of it. So you get immediate feedback from the people that are working as well'

In contrast to the above, other events are much more ad hoc and preoccupied with the pursuit of short-term outcomes, and display scant evidence of clear objectives, or evaluation. The research suggested that these events adopted, at best, an informal approach to the determining of objectives and their evaluation. In response to a question about working from clearly defined objectives, Wendy stated that,

'Very few people, very few … I think they have very clear objectives…it's been my experience that once they've done that (completed event proposal) and got the money, that document is put in a folder and forgotten about and then they're running around going 'We want a really nice lunch'. 'We want nice rooms', and it's almost they've thought about what they want to achieve with the day…'

Wendy goes on to reveal,

'We've never sit down after an event and say 'This is the feedback''

The research is revealing in demonstrating that there is an inclination, in the case of many events to, at best, measure the hard factors to which simple metrics can be applied. There is a need to develop thinking within the institution of critical success factors relating to events, certainly in the measurement of hard factors, but particularly as regards softer objectives, which remain neglected. Delivering superior event experience is reliant upon, among other things, a virtuous process involving evaluation that then feeds into the next event design. If that chain is broken there is no foundation for improvement in the event experience of attendees, or the achievement of associated objectives.

Evaluation of events should include review of the process in addition to the outcomes. Repeated evidence came to light through the research that tensions existed between the event manager and the other departments in the institutions micro-environment that support the event, including security, catering, and IT. Kate, stated that,

'You have your hiccups, you know. I mean we had a situation a few weeks ago. It was totally outside catering's control, but it was quite serious what had happened, but there's no feedback. They don't feedback to you on anything, you know'.

A popular opinion expressed by respondents was that support departments are primarily set up to support the teaching activities of the university and this impacts their effectiveness in providing the required support for events.

4.5. Events: the need for a community

The research strongly indicated that many people involved in delivering events within the institution were not initially recruited for that purpose. Equally the evidence indicated that the training and development relating to their event management role was scarce. Five of the seven interviewees emphasised that more effective selection, training and development relating to event management would be a major step towards combating issues that exist with event management at the institution. Many event organisers, particularly at a more local level within the departments, have a primary job title that does not reflect their events role. Therefore event organisation is one, albeit increasingly significant, part of their work.

There is a wider issue relating to the 'cottage industry' theme identified in Section 4.1. The institution has a disparate collection of event organisers delivering a similar role but there is a marked absence of community of shared practice. This importance of this issue is captured by Stephen,

'the key challenges are consistency…I think consistency of resources so that we have a kind of professional … Professional is perhaps too strong a word, but at the moment there's a lot of people involved in it who don't have events as part of their background but they've kind of learned on the job. So I think there's a need for some kind of professional framework and I think there's a need for the (institution) to really understand how they fit within its overall strategic objectives and how they can be maximised and followed-up on. They tend to be treated as one-offs'

The issue of learning on the job was a recurring theme, and is exemplified by Kate,

'I put a student conference on in March. That was from scratch. A person who had not done a conference before and that was a big learning curve because then you realise just how much knowledge you have got in putting an event on… I had nothing, no training'

The opportunity to develop a framework of support and shared practice was identified by Wendy, who commented,

'I think that would be an excellent idea.

Therefore the opportunity exists to develop a professional framework that would stimulate an event management community that would benefit from shared practice, learning, and support. With the aim of facilitating a more co-ordinated approach consistent with the communication and delivery of brand strategy. An 'event community' would be a pre-requisite ingredient towards the development of a benchmark event experience. Such development could potentially underpin the relationship between strategy and events.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The HEI within which this research was carried out has grown from 7000 students 30 years ago to over 29,000 in 2008, with a proportionate increase in the scale and number of events. It would seem evident that the institution has responded to this growth, particularly in the case of recruitment, and other core events. Conversely developments in more localised and peripheral events (which are many and varied) have not been so progressive, leading to them becoming disparate and fragmented. There exists an imperative to review event management within the organisation. This finding is consistent with current developments in the HEI, whereby a strategic review of event management structures and delivery has recently been commissioned. The finding in this paper, of events increasing in scale and strategic importance, yet remaining overly operational and ad hoc, is in line with previous studies (Pugh and Wood, 2004).

The picture of events at the institution is eclectic. Too many events remain peripheral, for the purpose of this discussion these can be illustrated as maverick events in that they, and their organisers, are not sufficiently integrated into the university's strategy. Given the experiential nature of events (Hauser, 2005) they have the potential to powerfully enhance brand perceptions, and to equally damage brand perception when handled without the professional approach they demand, meaning events remain as much a risk as an opportunity.

Discussion of experience marketing (Russel, 2007) is pertinent. Events are inconsistently integrated into both the wider marketing communications strategy and also associated customer relationship marketing activity. Palpably a trend exists whereby the pre- and post-event communications lacked recognisable links to the brand strategy. These demand attention as they represent 'missed opportunities', as articulated by Stephen in his interview. Developments in this respect would compel events to be more integrated and not so disparate.

This case study has exposed various impediments that frustrate events in realising their strategic potential as an interactive communication of brand values and positioning (Whelen and Wholfeil, 2006). These barriers are synonymous with discussion heralded in strategic management texts consistent with issues of strategic capability of an organisation, comprising their resources and competencies (Evans et al., 2003). The existence of many instances of relative 'event management' excellence within the institution indicates the existence of apposite tangible and intangible resources favourable to event management, particularly human and intellectual resources. Required competencies are evident within the HEI and are being leveraged to support events. Accordingly, and at the risk of oversimplifying the discussion, the principle challenge the HEI faces is to develop their capabilities, with a particular focus upon systems, processes, and communications.

The cultural web (Johnson et al., 2009) is a useful paradigm to through which to articulate the problem areas within the case study organisation. There are many issues surrounding power structures, organisational structures, control systems, and rituals and routines that act as barriers to the development and delivery of events that sustain and enhance the brand strategy of the institution. Central to the psyche of HEIs is a tension between scholarly and managerialism (Chapleo, 2005), manifesting itself in the issue of dispersal of power versus a more centralised approach. Consistent with this, it was evident that the further the event was located from the centre of the institution (and core strategic priorities) the more the links to brand strategy became porous, and the approach to event management informal.

A logical tenet of managerialism is that events should support and further the strategy of the institution. However the tensions exemplified in the case study demonstrate event design and delivery that lacks consistency and integration. This creates inefficiencies and variable stakeholder experience, leading to missed opportunities to underpin institutional strategy.

The absence of effective control systems is a noteworthy issue relating to the above discussion. The development of appropriate control systems would provide a framework within which events can be given the strategic focus it demands. Such a framework could support the development of an event community which would facilitate training, development, and shared practice. Crucially it could lead to benchmarking for event planning, delivery, and evaluation. Such progressive measures would solidify the links between strategy and events.

6. Limitations and suggested future research

The literature review identified the role that events play in supporting strategy, particularly realising objectives related to brand communication. Equally evident is that events have characteristics that make them complex to manage, and even more exigent to harness strategically. The relationship between events and strategy remains fairly embryonic and problematic, demanding further research to expose and investigate the issues and inform future practice.

The primary research in this paper constitutes a small study of one institution within the higher education sector. It has highlighted some key issues that demand further exploration. In the first instance further research that examines the relationship between organisations strategic capabilities (including resources, competencies, and culture) and events is required.

There are two specific research areas that would be valuable in informing future practice; these are discussed briefly in the following.

It is perhaps paradoxical that events, as an inherently unpredictable tool, are increasingly being utilised as a communicator of brand values. Particularly given the control organisations typically apply to brand communications. Further research could examine how developments in event management practice could reinforce the role of events as an integral part of the marketing communications mix. Such discussion should be linked to whether the concept of a benchmark event experience is valid, and if so how it could be devised and measured.

A prevalent issue in this paper is inconsistency in the use of strategic objectives to underpin events. Events are often used as tactic tools to achieve short-term outcomes and are disenfranchised from wider strategy. Embedding strategic objectives and using these to inform event design is crucial. Furthermore, linked to the concept of event experience, thorough evaluation is essential. Research and conceptual thinking would be beneficial in this area.

It is hoped that this paper provides a stimulus for future research to investigate how the events can be best managed within organisations to harness their strategic potential.

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